

## **The Past in *Ruins*: Postmodern Politics and the Fake History Film** **Steve Anderson**

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*Concern for authenticity links forger and documentary filmmaker – both create an illusion of the real through an elaborate web of artifice.*  
Jesse Lerner's *Ruins* (1998)

Since the late 1970s, theorists of historiography have challenged the assumption that the goal of history-writing should be the progressive assembling of "larger historical truths" into grand libraries of fact and interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Hayden White's influential writings on narrative and historiography claim that the work of the historian has never been merely the transliteration of a pre-existent past into a documentary medium. Rather, he argues that history is fundamentally constituted through the emplotment of historical data into recognizable narratives and literary tropes.<sup>2</sup> Although White's intervention initially proved more readily assimilable in the emerging field of cultural studies than within History proper, his privileging of narrative marked a significant challenge to the empiricist and positivist pretensions of much academic history.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of its reputation for conservatism and discursive sobriety, the discipline of History is far from monolithic. Ongoing challenges to historical research and writing protocols have resulted in a highly diverse and dynamically self-conscious array of competing methodologies. However, until the early 1990s, it was a rare historian who was willing to consider seriously the significance of film as a discrete and fully articulated form of historiographical practice. Arguably, the tropic convergence of history and literature described by White ultimately proved agreeable to historians in contrast with the greater threat posed by the dramatic spectacle of the history film. Hollywood's historical epics were – and, for that matter, still are – known for their factual inaccuracies, character composites and elisions of historical complexity in favor of plot-friendly contrivances centered on personality, conflict resolution and romance. Although the value of historical filmmaking is often presumed to be its ability to bring the past "to life," a certain dishonesty attends historical narratives that undertake to present the past as an experience that may be recaptured, relived or represented.<sup>4</sup> Put bluntly, the most interesting histories are those in which the past is fundamentally understood as a field of discursive struggle – a text that is open to revision and debate rather than one delivering comfortable narrative closure.

Over the past three decades, the sub-discipline of "Film and History" has carved a small but vibrant niche within academia. Beginning in 1971 with the founding of the specialty journal, *Film and History*, the past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of associations, publications and conferences devoted to media and history. In 1978, the TV mini-series *Roots* became the most popular television event – and arguably the most powerful historiographical moment – of its time.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, seminal works on film and history by Pierre Sorlin<sup>6</sup> and Marc Ferro<sup>7</sup> were translated into English and even mainstream journals such as the *American Historical Review* introduced film reviews as a regular feature. The 1990s, in turn, witnessed a veritable explosion of book publications on the subject, with contributions from both well-known historians and film scholars alike.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most influential and widely published figure in this movement was historian Robert Rosenstone who, as recently as 1993, was justified in declaring himself to be the first to articulate the specific characteristics of historical films rather than simply treating them as a visual adjunct to written history. Rosenstone went on to break ranks with his more conservative colleagues to focus attention on a number of films and videos that he regarded as examples of "postmodern history." Rosenstone's intervention marked a turning point in discussions of film and history, which had previously focused on questions of factual accuracy in large-scale historical epics. At the same time, theories of postmodernism that were once firmly predicated on assertions about the "loss of history" gave way to the troubling admission that in order to be "lost" history would first have to be "found."

Within cultural studies, more sophisticated models for understanding cultural memory emerged in response to experiments with radical history<sup>9</sup> and the redefining of popular memory by Michel Foucault and others.<sup>10</sup> The "culture of amnesia" associated with unreconstructed theories of television was gradually replaced with a notion of history and memory as fundamentally "entangled" with popular media rather than antithetical to it.<sup>11</sup> By the early 1990s, proclamations about "the end of history" following the collapse of the Soviet Union revealed themselves as cynical prevarications when Francis Fukuyama's "triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism"<sup>12</sup> led to an unprecedented (and still unresolved) economic crisis in Eastern Europe. Under the tutelage of Oliver Stone and Fox Mulder, American preoccupations with history came to be dominated by an amalgam of skepticism, conspiracy and paranoia mixed with furtive, lingering hopes in the reliability of carefully executed, scientific research methods and technology.

In documentary film theory of the 1980s and 90s, already precarious connections between the real world and systems of representation were aggravated by the introduction and proliferation of digital imaging technologies. The popularity of Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) revived once-scorned strategies of recreation and simulation in historical documentaries. Soon after the Rodney King verdict put the final nail in the coffin of visual positivism, the ontological status of images as historical evidence reached an all-time low and a renewed critical attention to ideas such as "performativity" necessitated revision of Bill Nichols' venerable taxonomy of documentary modes.<sup>13</sup> With increasing access to personal computers and the Internet, databases and digital archives emerged as the primary means of storing, organizing and disseminating historical information. The logic of the search engine, with its enabling of non-linear and non-teleological narratives, began motivating different kinds of historical storytelling, resulting in a profusion of counter-narratives, fantastic histories with multiple or uncertain endings, and alternative histories constructed from the point of view of traditionally disenfranchised or voiceless peoples. However, even the most hyperbolic of these works, such as the

Recombinant History Project's artificial intelligence apparatus, *Terminal Time* which generates infinitely customizable historical documentaries, rarely sought to undermine the grounds of historical understanding. Even in the midst of a culture of paranoia, the desire for coherent, historical narratives that rationalize the present remains powerfully seductive.

In popular culture, postmodernism's predilection for perpetual presentness resulted in well-known sublimations of the persistent desire for history into endless varieties of kitsch, pastiche and nostalgia. However, new modes of cinematic historiography emerged most actively from the other end of the high/low culture divide. In his 1984 article, "An Avant-Garde for the 80s" Paul Willemen described the goal of the avant-garde in the 1980s as (paraphrasing Godard), "cinema which doesn't just ask the questions of cinema historically, but asks the questions of history cinematically."<sup>14</sup> A few years later, Paul Arthur concurred, noting that, since the 1970s, the American avant-garde had been "increasingly infused with a historicizing energy" that represented a break with the previous 30 years of deliberate and insistent ahistoricism.<sup>15</sup> Both Willemen and Arthur viewed this "turn to history" in conjunction with a revitalized sense of political relevance in avant-garde filmmaking. Nearly two decades later, the revision and politicization of history and memory remain frequent obsessions among experimental filmmakers. The most interesting of these undertake an interrogation not only of the strategies of authentication deployed by documentary filmmaking but the material and epistemological premises of history itself. The latter part of this essay investigates the range of possibilities that have come under investigation in the sphere of experimental documentary filmmaking and looks in depth at an example of a "fake" historical documentary, Jesse Lerner's *Ruins*.

### **The Real in the Fake: Jesse Lerner's *Ruins***

*Almost any story is almost certainly some kind of lie...but not this time.*

-Orson Welles' *F is for Fake* (quoted in *Ruins*)

It is a truism of postmodern culture that the difference between truth and fiction is not what it used to be. But in Jesse Lerner's *Ruins*, this is more than an empty slogan, it's a point of departure. *Ruins* is a self-proclaimed "fake documentary" that exposes the persistence of colonialist ideology in pre-hispanic histories of Mexico and calls into question the processes by which the disciplines of archaeology and art history are constituted. In *Ruins*, Lerner is as much concerned with historiography – the processes of writing history – as with history itself. The film mobilizes a multiplicity of historiographical and documentary strategies, ranging from archival footage compilation and hidden camera interviews to cutout animation and fictional recreation. *Ruins* puts forward a scathing revelation of the racist and colonialist underpinnings of ancient Mesoamerican historiography and offers in its place an enlightened critique and alternate vision of the region's past. The film succeeds brilliantly in snatching Mexican history from the jaws of colonialist discourse, while simultaneously interrogating the conventions of authenticity and authority in the historical documentary.

*Ruins* is constructed in three movements. The first poses the basic questions of Mesoamerican historiography, debunking both the colonialist naivete of 19<sup>th</sup> century accounts and the arrogance of the "definitive" archaeological histories written in the 1940s and 50s. The second part of the film illustrates what is at stake in the history of this region and the ongoing instrumentalization of Mexican history in the interests of growing U.S. internationalism during WWII, followed by tourism and other corporate incarnations of Manifest Destiny. The final movement consists of a sustained meditation on questions of originality, authenticity and competing discourses of art and culture as refracted through the practice of forgery. The film's visual syntax is a blend of American avant-garde and essayistic documentary, combining strategies of found footage collage with a handheld, home-movie vernacular. The structure of *Ruins* is fundamentally intertextual, referencing other historical texts as well as fiction films, advertisements, music, newsreels, and Hollywood feature films. Audiences must work to make meaning out of the diverse juxtapositions and layers of historical revision embedded in the film, a process that is consistent with its implicit critique of dramatic narrative historiography.

The opening sequence in *Ruins* presages the film's pedagogical intent. Title cards identify the setting as the Yucatan Peninsula in 1931, where Sylvanus G. Morley, a somewhat legendary figure in Mayan archaeology, is teaching a Maya woman to speak English. The young woman stands in front of a pyramid dressed in traditional Mayan garb and phonetically pronounces the words, "We are dressed as our ancestors were, who lived here in peace and contentment 700 years ago." The scene ends with a somewhat awkward bow toward the camera, followed by another title card announcing the film to be a "Fake Documentary." The next shot is a pan from the ancient Mayan pyramids of El Rey to the pyramid-shaped hotels of contemporary Cancun. This opening sequence functions as a metaphor for the historiographical strategies of the entire film. Past and present are dialogically imbricated in relations of space, time, language and ideology. In order to truly understand the past, one must first grapple with both the desires of the present and the awkward mechanisms through which historical discourse is rendered.

Following this preamble, a feature film-style credit sequence introduces each of the film's major "characters," thereby announcing one of Lerner's guiding ambiguities – the fluidity of fact and fiction in terms of performance, evidence and documentation. *Ruins*' "elaborate web of artifice" begins with a sequence of crude, cutout animations, accompanied by voice-over narration from several 19<sup>th</sup> century histories of Mexico and Central America. The animations depict events for which no documentary record exists – the expropriation of ancient Mexican objects and their installation in American and European art museums.<sup>16</sup> The animations are accompanied by inconclusive speculations on the origins of the Mayan people (with theories ranging from the lost tribe of Israel to Vikings and Pygmies). These histories attempt to reconcile the reputed savagery of Mayan rituals with the magnificence of their architectural and artistic accomplishments. A final voice-over admits that, in the absence of definitive proof, all historians can rely on is "probabilities and conjectures," while on screen the pages of a history book are systematically shredded, another metaphoric rendering of the historical revision

that will be enacted in the film.

*Ruins* borrows its overall rhetorical strategy from post-colonial theory to highlight the power relations implicit in the gaze of the ethnographer and the cultural narratives that are their stock in trade. The film implicitly argues that the act of viewing and theorizing “primitive” cultures cannot take place outside the paradigms of colonialist ideology. Appropriating the past in order to render it in a coherent, linear narrative, the film argues, is equivalent to the cultural appropriation of the colonizer. By labeling the film a “fake,” Lerner distances himself from the problematic histories of visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. *Ruins* proceeds to mobilize discourses of documentary accuracy and historical authenticity along divergent trajectories, a destabilizing gesture that leads to a reflexive questioning of the filmmaker’s own process. Interestingly, Lerner’s disruption of the fact/fiction binary is only a temporary rhetorical strategy that allows him to distinguish his project from the outmoded pedantry of his racist predecessors, while eventually coming around to articulate his own revision of the historical record. In spite of repeated proclamations that the film is a “fake,” by the end of *Ruins*, a senile old history has essentially been replaced with a smarter, newer one. The difference is that *Ruins* functions as an open rather than a closed text – one that suggest fissures and contradictions in its own argument and ultimately stretches beyond the critique of historiography to pose an indictment of tourism, colonialism, ethnography and documentary itself.

### **Voices of Authenticity**

*Is not this film like a museum filled with artifacts, some authentic, some not?*

*-Ruins*

The story told in *Ruins* is dispersed into a multiplicity of voices, some of which are linked to on-screen characters and texts while others are presented as disembodied fragments, quotations, recreations and fakes. Lerner’s role as filmmaker thus comes to resemble that of a ventriloquist rather than a unifying consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Lerner speaks from a position of omniscience only in rare moments throughout the film. The most notable examples are when a female narrator’s voice ruminates on the similarities between documentary and forgery, and when recurring intertitles remind viewers that they are watching a “Fake Documentary” made in 1998. In the latter half of the film, *Ruins* becomes increasingly idiosyncratic in the range of voices it presents, eventually quoting figures as disparate as Orson Welles, Margaret Meade, Rod Serling and Allen Ginsberg. This panoply of voices metaphorically references the associative montage of historical consciousness and creates a web of textual connections and collisions. Lerner thus establishes a contract with the viewer that is based not on trust that he is presenting reliable information, but a tacit agreement to collectively investigate and draw meaning from a range of historical perspectives, images, artifacts and documents.

The first and last sections of the film are anchored by contemporary interviews with two individuals representing opposite ends of the spectrum of historical authenticity. The first interview is with a woman named Maria Elena Pat, who is identified as an eyewitness to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century excavation of Mayan cities by archaeologists Sylvanus Morley and Eric Thompson. Speaking to the camera, Pat refutes and ridicules the accepted histories of Mayan culture, arguing that Morley and Thompson fundamentally misunderstood Mayan language, culture and politics. Pat speaks as a cultural insider but also as a well-informed critic of Morley and Thompson's outmoded research methods. Her monologue is intercut with archival footage of Morley and Thompson presenting their theories as well-established archaeological facts. In juxtaposition with Pat's critique, however, Morley and Thompson's once authoritative accounts are made to appear preposterously speculative and transparently rooted in projections of their own cultural anxieties.

Interestingly, however, Pat's analysis is not simply presented as an unproblematic correction of the historical record. In order to undermine the authority of her (somewhat unlikely) testimony, Lerner positions Pat against a rear projection screen on which appears a series of images by Laura Gilpin depicting scenes of Mayan civilization. This strategy<sup>18</sup> lends a highly constructed, performative feel to the interview, suggesting that Pat's testimony may be as much of an artificial construct – a potential fake – as everything else in the film. This layering of discourses of authenticity and artifice underscores *Ruins'* operating premise that the past is accessible only through accumulated layers of historical sedimentation<sup>19</sup> and competing interpretation. Historical consciousness, as Walter Benjamin argued, does not move forward through "homogenous, empty time."<sup>20</sup> The chaotic structure and contradictory discursive strategies of *Ruins* function as a metaphor for historical sedimentation and the need to sift through layers of evidence and interpretation in order to understand both the past and the construction of history.

In the latter part of the film, Lerner's interest in the relation between reality and artifice is most clearly embodied in the heroic, but ultimately tragic figure of the forger. *Ruins* tells the story of an art forger named Brigida Lara who, in the 1960s and 70s reputedly created thousands of sculptures that came to define the art of the Totonac culture, a pre-Aztec society in Mexico's Gulf Coast region. Lara's forgeries were so convincing that many of them were sold to museums as ancient artifacts and Lara was arrested and temporarily jailed as a looter (rather than a forger) of antiquities. Many of Lara's pieces are now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and other high-profile collections – an unintentional joke at the expense of connoisseurs of "primitive" art. In one remarkable sequence, Lara looks at images of his own work in a coffee table book called *Masterpieces of Primitive Art* and proudly presents some of his sculptures to the camera, caressing them lovingly while the narrator ruminates on the nature of forgeries. Are they "worthless embarrassments or treasured pieces of art?"

Unlike the clearly staged interview with Pat, Lara is shot verite-style on location in his studio and in the field as he meticulously seeks out exactly the right kind of clay, tools and conditions for creating his sculptures. Lara tells the story of his life as a forger in an earnest voice-over, noting that, although his intention was not to

deceive, his work has significantly shaped the museum's definitions of authenticity. Lara is ultimately unapologetic about his role in the falsification of Totonac history, remarking simply, "it's their problem if they were fooled. It's supposed to be a healthy experience." Like Lerner's film, Lara's forgeries transcend the presumed limitations of their inauthentic origins. What is under investigation is not simply questions of truth vs. fiction, but the institutions of authority and authenticity exemplified by the art museum and its self-perpetuating – sometimes self-serving – curatorial practices. Expanding beyond questions of historical value and authenticity, *Ruins* thus articulates a withering indictment of the art world's systems of authority and claims to cultural relevance.

The latter part of *Ruins* also presents etymological exegeses of words such as "reproduction" and "replica," distinguishing them from forgeries by their relation to deception and embeddedness in the power dynamics of cultural appropriation. The trade in replicas and reproductions – presented as an important part of the tourism industry in contemporary Mexico – operates through a tacit agreement between buyer and seller that the objects offer primarily symbolic or sentimental value. By contrast, the collecting of original artifacts by wealthy foreigners (including Nelson Rockefeller, whose private plane was reputedly so heavily laden with Mayan sculptures that it was unable to take off) constituted a clear gesture of economic and cultural exploitation. The irony that an unknown percentage of the artifacts collected under these circumstances were forgeries is not lost on Lerner who positions this fact among other discourses of resistance and tactical response to U.S. cultural hegemony. In what appears to be a hidden camera interview, a replica seller insightfully theorizes that Americans are interested in the indigenous cultures of Mexico because they are a nation of immigrants with no real history of their own. This fleetingly incisive moment of non-expert analysis throws into relief the convolutions and pretenses of academicized history and its endless revisions.

In *Ruins*, the overt parallels between the art forger and the documentary filmmaker suggest that fiction and artifice may come closer to "staging the real" than the faithful reproduction of documentary facts. The film argues implicitly that histories that are not subject to revision and debate are thereby drained of their dynamism and cultural relevance. More importantly, static histories are removed from the arena of politics, where meaning is formed in relation to the needs of the present and desires to transform the future. The conception of historiography deployed in *Ruins* does not simply recover or preserve a factual history, but actively engages in the conflicts and uncertainty of the past. Historians should not understand themselves to be constrained by the impossibility of total historical preservation. Rather, *Ruins* demonstrates that they may equally be freed by it to construct a relationship with the past that is imperfect and improvisational and to understand "history" as constituted through multiple voices and cascading layers of meaning.

It is axiomatic to this discussion that most commercial history films have asked too little of their audiences, presumed too little knowledge and sophistication, and offered too little in the way of insight and relevance about the past. Most Hollywood films, to put it bluntly, construct their audiences primarily as consumers – both in the obvious economic sense and also ideologically – as the generators of

predetermined emotional responses; receptacles and spectators rather than producers, actors or agents of history. As films like *Ruins* show, the first step toward a more sophisticated conception of historiography lies not in reforming narrative cinema's historical epics or the unapologetic empiricism practiced on the History Channel. Those who care about the construction and dissemination of history on film should begin by articulating strategies of counter-reading for the histories that are most deeply embedded in contemporary society. And perhaps most importantly, they must cultivate an awareness of long marginalized experiments with historiographical form and recognize the potential for a politically engaged, postmodern historiography.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, debates over the relationship between fact and fiction in historiography are much older than that. In Western universities, the discipline of History was not fully articulated until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, concurrent with – and in response to – the rise of the historical novel. See Leo Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding and Gibbon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Although the unprecedented commercial success of *Roots* underscored the power of both historical fiction and televisual history, critical attention remained focused disproportionately on film as opposed to television.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Robert Brent Toplin's *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (1996), Peter C. Rollins' *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (1983), Robert Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (1995), George MacDonald Fraser's *The Hollywood History of the World: From One Million Years B.C. to Apocalypse Now* (1988), Vivian Sobchack's *Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (1996), Robert Rosenstone's *Revising History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (1995), Leger Grindon's *Shadows of the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (1994), Mark Carnes' *Past Imperfect* (1995), Marcia Landy's *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (1996), Maria Wyke's *Projecting the Past* (1996), Michael Lynch and David Bogen's *The Spectacle of History* (1997), Marcia Landy's *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (2001).

<sup>9</sup> This is evidenced in the legacies of "history from below" and oral history movements of the 1960s and 70s.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright, "The Public and the Past," in *Making Histories*, eds. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwarz, David Sutton (London: Anchor, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> See Marita Sturken *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon, 1992) 44.

<sup>13</sup> See Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Willemsen, "An Avant-Garde for the 80s," *Frameworks* 24 (Spring 1984) 68.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Arthur, "The Four Last Things," *Frameworks* 22 no.3 (1984) 32.

<sup>16</sup> The "exhibition" depicted in the animation is loosely based on William Bullock's display of Aztec objects at the Egyptian Hall in London in 1824, a display which included a live Indian, a facsimile of the Codex Boturini, and a possibly fake stone serpent. For more background on this exhibition, see Ian Graham's essay, "Three Early Collectors in Mesoamerica" in Elizabeth H. Boone, ed., *Collecting the Pre-Columbian Past* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> This authorial dispersion stands in contrast with comparable works such as Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1997) and Marlon Fuentes' *Bontoc Eulogy* (1997), in both of which the filmmaker appears as an onscreen character and provides a focal point of the narrative.

<sup>18</sup> This sequence is reminiscent of the rear-projection performance sequence in Straub and Huillet's *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1969).

<sup>19</sup> This idea of historical sedimentation is developed in George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1985).